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ABSTRACT

Major policies and recommended procedures for the accreditation of graduate programs is presented. The policies and procedures discussed apply to all institutions offering graduate work that are accredited or seek accreditation, including "newer" types such as external degree programs, programs established for highly specialized student populations, and/or programs and institutions sponsored by the government, business, or industry as well as the traditional colleges and universities. Terms related to graduate programs and accreditation are defined. The purposes and function of graduate education and accreditation and recommendations related to responsibility for accreditation are presented. The evaluation and accreditation process related to existing programs, new programs, and programs at separately accreditable units is described. (SPG)

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Accreditation of Graduate Education

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A JOINT POLICY STATEMENT

The Council of Graduate Schools in the United States

Accreditation of Graduate Education

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PREFACE

This statement presents major policies and recommended procedures for the accreditation of graduate programs. It was developed by a Joint Task Force of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation and the Council of Graduate Schools in consultation with recognized accrediting bodies, and has been approved by the COPA and CGS governing boards. It is intended to apply to all institutions offering graduate work which are accredited or seek accreditation by an agency recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation. These include "newer" types such as external degree programs, programs established for highly specialized student populations, and/or programs and institutions sponsored by the government, business, or industry as well as the traditional colleges and universities.

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The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation | The Council of Graduate Schools in the United States

May 1978

The maintenance and improvement of quality has always been a dominant concern in graduate education. The subtleties and ambiguities surrounding the concept of quality do not obviate the need for continuing review and assessment. Moreover, in recent years, new developments have made more necessary diligence and vigilance in appraising academic quality and institutional viability. More prominent among these developments are: the continuing decline of financial support of graduate education, changing enrollments, increasing heterogeneity of student populations, growing public demand for "accountability," accelerating interest in innovative and experimental programs and institutions, rapidly developing off-campus and satellite centers, changing patterns of institutional governance, and increasing complexity of such issues as academic credit.

For approximately a half century, a major indicator of these qualities has been accreditation by a nationally recognized accrediting agency. Such accreditation is unique to this country and serves in place of governmental evaluation and control characteristic of most other nations. Although its effectiveness has been generally recognized by the higher education community, certain aspects continue to be of healthy interest and concern. The accreditation of graduate work, in particular, poses a variety of thought-provoking questions. Who shall accredit? For what purposes? At what levels? In what fields? According to what procedures?

These and similar concerns are addressed in the following sections of this publication.

Definition of Terms

Graduate Program. Since the essence of graduate education lies in the graduate degree program, the program is the appropriate basis for consideration of accreditation of graduate work. A graduate degree program is considered to be a set of academic experiences offered to a graduate student which are to be satisfactorily completed in order to make appropriate the award of a graduate degree such as Master or Doctor.

Two main types of graduate programs, distinguishable by primary objectives, have been traditionally recognized:

1. *Research-oriented* graduate degree programs, where the primary objective is to train graduate students through the Master's or Doctor's level as preparation for scholarly or research activity directed mainly toward the acquisition of new knowledge, and completion of the program ordinarily is identified by award of the degree of Master of Arts (M.A.), Master of Science (M.S.), or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D).

2. *Practice-oriented* graduate degree programs, where the primary objective is to train graduate students through the Master's or Doctor's level in preparation for professional practice directed mainly toward the application or transmission of existing knowledge, and completion of the program ordinarily is identified by award of the degree of Master of (Professional Field) or Doctor of (Professional Field), e.g., Master of Education (ME), Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Social Work (MSW), Master of Fine Arts (MFA), Doctor of Arts (DA), Doctor of Musical Arts (DMA), and others.

Today, this distinction is made more in an attempt to bring order to the confused state of degree nomenclature rather than to imply a sharp dichotomy between the two types. Indeed, in many instances, the purposes and requirements of the programs have merged to the point where they are indistinguishable, and such questions as "What is a 'professional' program?" and "What is a 'disciplinary' program?" may not be as important as they may have been in the past.

Accreditation. Accreditation in postsecondary education in the United States is a voluntary, nongovernmental self-regulating process (although there may be certain types of interaction with state agencies and, to a lesser extent, the federal government). The granting of accreditation status signifies that an institution or program meets or exceeds a level of quality considered to be necessary for that particular institution or program to achieve its stated purposes and thereby meet its responsibilities to all its publics.

There are two types of accreditation in higher education:

1. *General or institutional accreditation* is accreditation of a total institution and represents an expression of confidence by a nationally recognized accrediting association in an institution's mission, purposes, resources, present performance, and long-range ability to maintain or improve that performance.

There are currently nine postsecondary commissions of six regional associations as well as four national associations for specialized institutions which are recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation to perform this function. In addition, several of the programmatic accrediting agencies accredit freestanding, single-purpose institutions.

2. *Specialized or programmatic accreditation* is accreditation of a particular program within a college or university by a nationally recognized accrediting association representing a single practice-oriented field, such as architecture, law, medicine, psychology, or social work, primarily in order to assure that the purposes and accomplishments of the practice-oriented program meet the needs of society. There are approximately forty national professional agencies which primarily accredit programs within institutions and which are recognized by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation to perform this function.

Purposes and Functions

Graduate Education. The major, traditional, and nationally-recognized purposes of graduate education are generally considered to be:

1. The advanced education and intellectual development of able and motivated individuals in a variety of forms and disciplines essential to the pursuit of specific careers.

2. The production of new knowledge through research and intellectual inquiry and/or the application of knowledge toward the solution of technological, social, economic, and political problems and issues.

3. The preservation and transmission of knowledge and the extension of our cultural heritage to successive generations.

Accreditation. The higher education community recognizes the following purposes of accreditation:

1. The fostering of excellence in postsecondary education through the development of criteria and guidelines for assuring educational effectiveness.

2. The encouragement of self-improvement through continuous self-study and assessment.

3. Assurance to the higher education community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution or program has clearly defined and appropriate objectives, has the resources for reasonable assurance of the attainment of stated objectives, and is making a continuous effort to produce evidence of the attainment of its objectives.

4. Provision of counsel and assistance to developing institutions and programs.

5. Encouragement of diversity, experimentation, and innovation within the boundaries of generally accepted standards and guidelines of academic quality.

6. Protection of institutions against encroachment which might jeopardize educational effectiveness or academic freedom.

Responsibility for Accreditation

In order to implement the two sets of purposes stated above and in order to best serve the general interest and welfare of the public, it is recommended that:

1. The review and appraisal of graduate degree programs should be included as part of the institutional accreditation of a college or university.

2. Programmatic accreditation should be considered appropriate primarily for practice-oriented fields, particularly those which focus on the protection of the health, safety, and well-being of the public.

3. The granting of institutional accreditation should take cognizance of, but need not require, specialized accreditation of individual graduate degree programs, and vice versa.

4. Accrediting agencies in their requirements and procedures should avoid placing an unnecessary burden upon an institution or program.

5. Institutional and specialized accrediting agencies should continue to explore more effective means for interaction and cooperation.

6. Institutional and programmatic accrediting agencies should be prepared, in all instances, to justify their requirements and activities as expressions of concern for educational quality and public interest.

The Evaluation and Accreditation Process

Existing Programs. In institutional accreditation, all graduate programs are considered to be vital and integral components of the institution and are included within its comprehensive evaluation. In specialized accreditation, the graduate program is viewed in depth as well as within the context of the total institution. In both instances, the evaluation and accreditation process typically consists of: (1) an intensive self-analysis by the institution or program; (2) an on-site visit by an evaluation team; and (3) a judgment of representatives of the community of interests sitting as a decision-making body.

In order to be of maximum benefit to the institution and program, the content of the self-study should be introspective and analytical rather than merely descriptive. A primary focus should be upon the determination of quality through an assessment of outcomes, i.e., the evidence which the institution/program is producing or seeking to produce concerning the attainment of its stated objectives. For a graduate program, such evidence might appropriately include: (1) student and alumni evaluations of their programs and courses; (2) longitudinal studies of the professional performance of graduates; (3) data concerning the continuing scholarly productivity of graduates; and (4) such other information congruent with the stated objectives of the program and institution.

The second part of the evaluation process is the on-site evaluation visit by a team of peer representatives from other institutions and, in the case of specialized agencies,

from the professions. The team's major function is to make a considered group judgment, as informed colleagues and professionals, on the educational effectiveness of the institution and/or program. In order to assure that the graduate program(s) receive proper attention during this phase of the process, it is strongly recommended that each regional team visiting an institution with substantial graduate offerings should include a person competent to appraise the organization and administration of graduate study within the context and structure of the total institution. It is further recommended that all regional team members representing academic disciplines or specialized fields include the assessment of graduate programs in their specializations as part of their evaluation responsibility. Where a program has received specialized accreditation, however, there is no need for the regional team's assessment to recapitulate that of the programmatic agency.

The various accrediting agencies publish standards and guidelines for use in the assessment of graduate programs. Today, most of these are expressed qualitatively rather than quantitatively as in the past. They usually recommend consideration of the following aspects of graduate study:

- Clarity and appropriateness of objectives;
- Identity of the graduate and professional programs as administrative units;
- Qualifications of the faculty;
- Design and content of the graduate program;
- Appropriateness of admission, retention, and degree requirements;
- Policies regarding academic credit by transfer, life experiences, or other non-traditional activities;
- Policies and requirements for off-campus or extension centers;
- Adequacy of supporting resources;
- Interaction and interrelation with the undergraduate programs;

> Evidence of educational outcomes.

New Programs. Since graduate degree programs initiated subsequent to the most recent accreditation are not automatically included in that accreditation, it is recommended that each accrediting agency develop a statement of policy and procedure for the approval of new programs. In general, each agency should receive an institution's notice of intent prior to the introduction of the program. If the proposed program is closely allied to existing graduate offerings, the notice of intent may consist of a brief description of the proposed program or it may be a duplicate of the planning document prepared for approval by the institution's governing board or state agency.

If the proposed program is: (1) at a higher degree level; (2) in a totally different field; (3) at an off-campus location; or (4) requires a significant increase in resources, a more detailed notice of intent is appropriate. It is suggested that this document include such data as: (1) evidence of need for the program; (2) adequacy of faculty, library, and research resources; (3) outline of degree requirements; and (4) plans for the evaluation of educational outcomes.

The accrediting agency should review the educational nature of the proposal as well as its potential impact on related programs and the total institution. The accrediting agency should notify the institution whether its accreditation will be extended to include the new program or whether additional information, an on-site evaluation, or other measures will be required.

Programs at Separately Accreditable Units. When an institution conducts graduate programs in a variety of locations or through a number of discrete units, it will be expected to consult the appropriate accrediting agencies concerning the manner in which evaluation will be conducted and accreditation designated.

Graduate programs offered at a separately accreditable unit located outside the geographical region of the parent institution should normally be included in the accreditation of that unit by the regional accrediting agency responsible for that location. Communication and interaction between involved agencies are, of course, essential.

In the review of graduate programs at units not separ-

ately accreditable but conducted by an institution outside its own accrediting region, representatives of the agency in that region should be invited to participate in any on-site evaluation conducted by the accrediting agency of the region in which the parent institution is located.

Policies concerning the quality of education and related matters such as advertising, dues, fees, and related matters pertaining to graduate programs offered at off-campus centers should be consistent with the policies of the responsible accrediting agencies with respect to such centers.

Additional copies of this statement
may be obtained from:

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation
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The Council of Graduate Schools in the United States
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